

Will Japan Re-Arm?

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Summary

Newly elected Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has vowed to expand Japan's military. But can he and, more importantly, will he? Within Japan, military officers are increasingly turning to the details of fighting far from the home islands -- a new generation of F-2 fighter jets, only months in service, includes advanced ground-attack aircraft. The rise of China, too, is spurring other capitals to help Tokyo emerge from the shadow of defeat in World War II.

Analysis

Fresh from his election and facing a new set of political, economic and military realities, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi is subtly calling for strengthening Japan's Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and expanding their reach. But a standing military and the right of belligerency remain technically illegal under the Japanese constitution. One of the largest questions in Asia is whether Koizumi will succeed.

Will Japan rearm? Increasingly, the answer appears to be yes. Japan's economic tailspin and the rise of a new generation are colliding with a new geopolitical reality in Asia: the American desire to scale back as China ascends. Already Tokyo has most of the components of a large, modern military; only a few



Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi answers questions at the budget committee of the lower house of parliament in Tokyo, May 14.

key pieces are missing, and they can be obtained easily.



Today, Japanese naval forces are becoming more skilled at fighting simulated battles abroad, as evidenced by a spate of recent exercises. A U.S. military report found that the Japanese are becoming more technologically capable of operating alongside U.S. forces -- something that can't be said of many European forces. Japan also is signing basing agreements abroad. And in military journals, Japanese officers are trying to understand the challenges of conflict far from home.

Japan At the Turning Point

In a strategic sense, Japan is at a turning point.

Koizumi's independent foreign policy asks the JSDF to become a faster, more mobile force capable of projecting itself far from Japanese territory. Creating a credible Japanese military deterrent in East Asia -- after more than a half century of isolationism -- will place Tokyo at the center of the competition for influence in the region. More than those by the United States or China, Japan's moves will intensify an already heated competition for regional influence.

During his first policy speech to the Diet, Japan's parliament, Koizumi clearly pushed for a foreign policy independent of the United States. "We must not allow ourselves to be complacent with peace and become oblivious to the possibility of disturbances," he said, adding "it is the duty of the political leadership to consider what kind of structure should be created in the event that the state or the people are exposed to crises." Koizumi indicated that he would put forward "emergency legislation" to address changing security needs.

Koizumi's own role is nearly incidental to the realities of Japanese politics now taking shape, however. Domestic support for the pacifistic article of the constitution, Article 9, is decidedly mixed: half the population supports revising it and half is against such a change. The semantic difference between a self-defense force and a military is breaking down, too. "It is not natural that the Self-Defense Forces are not the military," Koizumi said.

Meanwhile, a generational shift is occurring in Japan. The generation that fought World War II and rebuilt Japan afterward felt close ties to the United States, due to both the occupation and the Cold War that ensued. But more and more, Japanese under 50 -- many behind Koizumi -- are prepared for Japan to play a larger, more independent role in the security of Asia.

Bridging the Gap

The wall that separates Japan's armed forces from being a potent military force is paper thin. The Koizumi government has inherited one of the world's biggest and most modern armed forces, backed by one of the largest military-industrial complexes.

Japanese Self Defense Forces Compared to Other Major Military Powers						
	JAPAN	NORTH KOREA	CHINA	INDIA	RUSSIA	USA
Navy	71 subs plus principal surface combatants	29 subs plus principal surface combatants	125 subs plus principal surface combatants	42 subs plus principal surface combatants	119 subs plus principal surface combatants	267 subs plus principal surface combatants
	80 combat aircraft		507 combat aircraft	37 combat aircraft	207 combat aircraft	788 combat aircraft
Airforce	331 combat aircraft	621 combat aircraft	3000+ combat aircraft	779 combat aircraft	3961 combat aircraft	1865 combat aircraft
Army	148,500 soldiers	950,000 soldiers	1.7 million soldiers	1.1 million soldiers	1.2 million soldiers	480,000 soldiers

Source: CDI & Pinescope

Japan took delivery of the first of 130 multirole F-2 fighter-bombers in September 2000. An advanced version of the U.S. F-16 assembled in Japan by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, the F-2 offers the JSDF new warfighting capabilities and will be outfitted with the latest in air-to-air and air-to-ground munitions, including the Maverick air-to-surface attack missile. The plane is reported to have a range of 620 miles. It will replace aging F-1 fighters and support 200 U.S.-built F-15s Japan now flies. The U.S. Air Force flies both planes into battle to establish air dominance.

Despite a decade-long recession, the amount Japan's defense spending, which is not limited by the constitution, is about \$50 billion annually. The JSDF has the largest navy in the Pacific, after the United States, and Japan's ground forces outnumber the British Royal Army and Royal Marines combined. This steady buildup has been historically sold to the Japanese public as a concession to the United States, which wants help from its ally.

JAPANESE MILITARY EXPENDITURES										
	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
*Constant US\$	46,984	47,676	48,819	49,377	49,632	50,112	51,092	51,319	51,285	51,184
% of GDP	1%	0.9%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%


* Figures are in million US dollars, at 1995 prices and exchange rates

Source: SIPRI

Yet during the past four years, Japan's military has begun to bridge the gap between being a self-defense force and a regional military. The transformation began in 1997 when a defense white paper publicly addressed a regional strategy as opposed to one focused on the areas near Japan. In 1999, while taking part in U.S. exercises in Guam, Japan deployed fighter aircraft outside its territory for the first time since World War II.

That same year, the JSDF took delivery of four Boeing 767 Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft; these improve the expeditionary capabilities of air forces. Last year, the JSDF exercised with other regional forces, and for the first time without the United States, in Operation Pacific Reach. And the Japanese government concluded an agreement that will allow its forces to use bases in Singapore in case of a crisis.





This pattern is continuing in 2001. Earlier this month, Japan for the first time sent officers to observe Cobra Gold, a joint Thai-U.S. military exercise, the largest in the region. Tokyo will purchase up to four more 767s to serve as aerial refueling platforms; these will increase the range of land-based F-15s to 3,000 miles. And the recent purchase of four Aegis-class destroyers will dramatically improve the ability to project power and conduct naval surveillance.

A U.S. military report concludes that Japanese forces are capable of a high degree of interoperability with the technologically advanced U.S. forces. This stands in stark contrast to the problems that still plague European militaries that have trained for war alongside the Americans through NATO for 50 years. Japan deployed 10 vessels to the RIMPAC exercise off Hawaii last year, twice as many as any non-U.S. force. There, the Japanese were privy to lessons learned by U.S. combat forces.

The fact that Japan's military is wrestling with the problems of warfare far from its coasts peppers military literature. "The essential point here is that Japan ought to learn lessons from the Persian Gulf War," Capt. Katsutoshi Kawano, chief of staff for the JSDF's Escort Flotilla One, wrote in a paper for the U.S. Naval War College.

Indeed, Japan's belief in the need to be able to fight abroad is stated even more plainly in an even more obvious location: the official web site of the Japanese Self Defense Agency.

The Power of Other Actors

In a larger sense, the rise of China is propelling Japan along the path toward reinstating a true military.

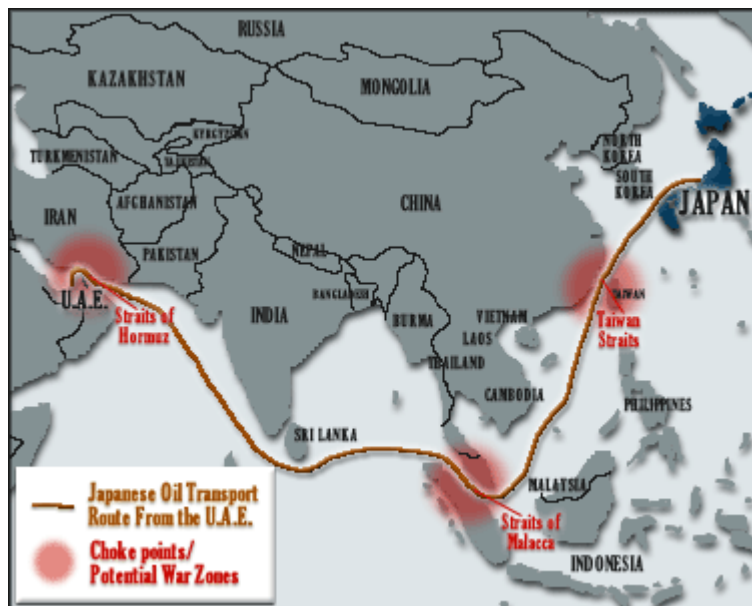
Asian governments are urging that Japan reconsider its pacifistic legal tradition. Last week, the Australian government urged Japan to undertake a larger security role. All are motivated by two concerns: the ascendance of China -- and the modernization of its antiquated military -- and signs that the United States will lower its profile in Asia.

Washington is playing an important role in pushing Japan toward its new role. As part of the wholesale review of U.S. military strategy, the Bush administration increasingly views Japan as the linchpin to the security of Asia. If Japan will do more of the heavy lifting of containing an expansionist China, Washington can lower its own profile, the cost of deployments and the exposure of its forces to attack. Meanwhile, the U.S.'s unfolding strategy is calling for the development of long-range weapons to reduce the physical presence of American forces in the region.

A recent study by the Rand Corp., conducted for the Defense Department, is now circulating at the Pentagon. Titled "The United States and Asia," the study highlights Japan, and to a lesser extent South Korea, as critical and active partners in maintaining security in Asia in the 21st century. This view dovetails with the official view: Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, during a trip to Japan earlier this month, encouraged a reappraisal of some of the constitutional restrictions placed on the JSDF.

While not giving an outright endorsement to changing the constitution, Armitage openly lamented Japan's inability "to participate in collective self

defense."



The Implications

Ironically, the resurrection of a regional military power in Tokyo raises the prospect of more, not less, confrontation in the region. The increasing reach of Japanese forces extends to China, its historic rival in Asia. China, as well as South Korea, the Philippines and others in the region who remember Japanese occupation, will view a growing Japanese military deterrent warily.

In the short term, the United States will support and even help finance Japan's evolution because it achieves the near-term goal of neutralizing a growing Chinese military threat. Over the long term, however, as Japan becomes increasingly involved in security affairs and fields a more aggressive navy, the United States may find itself contending with Japan over competing security interests.

"What is really worrisome is not simply Japan's current military capability," the Rand report said. "Japan has both the financial and technical means to transform its military into powerful strategic forces

in a relatively short period of time. Absent a U.S. presence, Japan may very well attempt to fill the power vacuum by becoming a major hegemonic contestant in the region."

Japan already has a serious territorial dispute over tiny Tokdo Island. The dispute is not with a rival like China, nor with an outside power like Russia, but with an erstwhile friendly neighbor: South Korea.

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